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ABSTRACT

The Bem Sex Role Inventory was administered to adults age 60 and over to examine the nature of their scores on this scale in light of their current developmental demands and life circumstances. This study examined whether there is reason to believe that the nature of mature adults' scores is influenced by four things: passage of time; cohort in which respondents were born; rural or urban context; or by chronological adult age. This continuation of earlier studies readministered the Bem Sex Role Inventory to community dwelling urban older adults who had been tested the first time when they were age 60 or older. At the same time, additional community dwelling cohorts of older adults were tested. Although none of the respondent samples strongly endorsed the Bem items, predictions that Masculinity scale items would be more strongly favored by rural participants, and that middle-aged participants' responses would differ by gender more than older participants' responses were supported. However other differences related to time, age, and gender ran counter to predictions. Results were interpreted in light of theories of sex role development, prior research on sex roles and aging, and the limitations of current measures of roles. Contains 16 references. A table of statistical analysis is appended. (JBJ)

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Reconsidering Sex Roles and Aging:
Preliminary Data on Some Influences of Context, Cohort, Time

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Running Head: Sex Roles and Aging Followup

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Abstract

Continuing earlier studies of sex role development in older adults, the Bem Sex Role Inventory was readministered (Time 2) to community dwelling urban older adults who had been tested the first time (Time 1) when they were age 60 or older. At the same Time 2, additional community dwelling cohorts of older adults were tested: some who at that point were age 60 or older; some who were rural residents age 60 or older; and some who were middleaged respondents. Although none of the respondent samples strongly endorsed the Bem items, our theory- and research-based predictions that Masculinity scale items would be more strongly favored by rural Ss, and that the middleaged Ss' responses would differ by gender more than the older Ss' responses would both were supported. However other differences related to time, age, and gender surprised us or ran counter to predictions. Results were interpreted in light of theories of sex role development, prior research on sex roles and aging, and the limitations of current measures of roles. Future directions are suggested.

Reconsidering Sex roles and aging: Preliminary data on some influences of context, cohort and time

In the present series of studies we have continued our earlier work using the Bem Sex Role Inventory with mature and older adults. As part of earlier studies and theoretical work (Sinnott, 1977, 1982, 1984ab, 1984-85, 1986; Sinnott, Block, Grambs, Gaddy & Davidson, 1980) the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI)(Bem, 1974) was administered to adults age 60 and over to examine the nature of their scores on this scale in light of their current developmental demands and life circumstances. The current studies were conceptualized to begin to test whether there is any reason to believe that the nature of mature adults' scores is influenced by four things: by the passage of time; by the cohort in which respondents were born; by the rural or urban context in which respondents are living; or by their chronological adult age ("old age", tested earlier, vs "middle age", not tested earlier). These beginning studies, and future work, can help us understand how adults and society co-construct social roles and, by extension, identities, as developmental demands change. Sex roles may not be the most important aspect of identity for most adults, yet may be an aspect of identity

that carries both a heavy emotional load and strong interpersonal demands. Sex roles also have been in transition in U.S. society over the last 20 years.

Measuring Sex Roles

There is no perfect measurement device to test constructs such as sex roles, and the BSRI (which we have used) is no exception. Each research decision must be associated to some extent with its own particular bias. For example, tests are normed on specific, available populations, few of which have mature adults in them, leading to bias toward the young. Tests involving social roles are biased by the historical moment and societal stereotypes current at the time they are constructed. Tests usually ask for general perceptions of how the respondent sees him or herself, not context specific ones (e.g., how the respondent sees his or her role as a parent vs as a worker). Consequently, the test in hand may be labelled a test of one construct while it actually may be a measure of quite another for the respondent (see Sinnott, 1986, 1987, 1994). The BSRI may not be measuring what we originally thought of as two factors (stereotypical global masculinity and femininity) in the same way in younger and older samples (Windle & Sinnott, 1985). And now, as Bem writes in The Lenses of Gender (1993), we see the partial fallacy and implications of conceptualizing sex roles in polar oppositional terms, especially in a society apparently wedded to biologically deterministic, heterosexist and anthropocentric descriptions of behavior related to sex and sex roles.

Of course new tests can be created. But then it is difficult to do the kinds of things we are attempting here, namely, comparisons among studies and longitudinal work. Once again we have a tradeoff and a limit to possibilities of performing perfect research.

Nevertheless, even imperfect tests are useful. A respondent does respond to something, and responds in a particular way which often differs from that of other respondents using the same tool. We can infer some beliefs or perceptions of the respondent from the responses. For example, if there is no change over time in the responses of a group, a different developmental or cohort or context reality can be inferred than if there is one. Whether or not the BSRI is an optimum instrument for the measurement of sex roles, today, in 40 or 60 year olds, using words that a 40 or 60 year old would articulate, it is useful. Not only has it been the measure used in much prior sex role research on which this (in part) longitudinal study is based, but it is an expression of an enduring stereotype of sex/gender differences that so far refuses to die in our culture.

Understanding the limitations of this stereotypic perception as a self-organizing device over the lifespan may help us see when and how it serves or undermines the individual or the society. Comparing the responses of various groups of mature adults with one another, using a measure of this stereotypic perception, allows us to see changes and differences in the way that particular organizing device (sex role stereotypes) operates

as a strong or a weak center of meaning.

Bem (1993) has spoken of the origins and the limitations of constructing the world using data seen through the lenses of gender polarization. There is a danger in asking questions using a polarized scale. One may indirectly strengthen two myths: the myth of polarized sex role identities; and the myth that the most important and most biological distinctions about adults involve gender and sexuality. Of course we don't want to do this. Our respondents have stories about their self concepts that are much fuller than their scores on sex role inventories or any other inventories can describe. For example, if past studies are any indicator (Sinnott et al., 1980), some of our potential and prior respondents seem to have transcended (Hefner, Rebecca & Oleshansky, 1975) their sex roles and have gone on to more complex self descriptions.

Comparing Ss' scores on the BSRI can enlighten us about this one aspect of their identity in comparison to their peers. Perhaps it can show whether or not polarized, traditional sex role labels are a strong part of their constructed self descriptions.

Goals of the Present Study

The earlier study of sex roles in community dwelling men and women age 60 years and older focused on antecedents and correlates of the development of androgyny in these older adults. At that point we were interested in testing the hypothesis that roles, for partly biologically adaptive reasons (Sinnott, 1977),

were moving toward androgyny as individuals matured. We expected that there would be some role learning taking place, and that it would come from life events and from the long-term enculturation of socioeconomic class, education, and other personal context variables. We also expected that social role expectations for this time of life would influence roles, and that cognitive processing (i.e., more or less complex thinking ability) would underlie potential role complexity. All these expectations were supported to some degree by qualitative and quantitative analyses (see publications cited earlier).

Some years later additional questions presented themselves. Some respondents who had originally been tested in 1979 became available for testing in 1987. We wondered whether the longitudinal testing of these respondents would show that change had occurred. We also wondered about the current cohort of 60+ individuals, and whether they differed from the earlier cohort in BSRI scores. Further, we were curious whether our urban sample was potentially different from rural samples of adults age 60+, since the demands of the two environments are very different in some potentially role-related ways. And finally, since there is relatively little data on middleaged persons' sex role scores, we wondered if the BSRI scores we obtained really could have held true for respondents as early as middle age, when life demands, societal control, and developmental stages already have changed dramatically for many individuals from those of (for many respondents) the mating-centered and parenting-centered earlier

years.

Although the samples involved were not as large as the first study sample, they were adequate to offer preliminary data on these questions. At first we hoped for larger samples and additional subsamples, delaying data analyses. Eventually it was determined that analyzing this first round of information would be useful in stimulating dicussions about theory and which data collections and analyses to pursue further with qualitative and qualitative research, so preliminary study analyses were performed. Those appear in this report.

The present study series was meant to stimulate theoretical discussion and to explore informal and formal hypotheses to help structure future qualitative and quantitative research.

-Mature adults will not strongly endorse either stereotypical masculinity or stereotypical femininity as general descriptors of their personality.

-The later 60+ cohort will be like the earlier one on the BSRI. The prediction is based on the idea that developmental variables would outweigh any social change, within an urban context.

-Longitudinal repeat respondents will show lower scores the second time on both masculinity and femininity scales. This was based on a prediction of increasing sex role transcendence over the lifetime.

-Rural respondents will show more sex-role stereotypic scores than urban respondents. This was based on the demands of

role expectations in this conservative rural context.

-Middleaged respondents will show more sex-role stereotypic scores than any older respondents. This was based on the continuing demands of the developmental tasks of middle age, for example, raising children, which would have been stereotypically apportioned in this cohort.

Methodology

Respondents

There were five groups of respondents in this series of studies. Each is described below.

Original older sample (tested at Time 1). This sample, described in great detail in Sinnott et al (1980) and Sinnott (1982), consisted of urban community dwelling individuals age 60+ in 1979. There were useable records for 235-251 women (depending on the analysis) and for 99-101 men (depending on the analysis).

New older sample (tested at Time 2). This sample was tested in 1987 and was comparable to the Time 1 sample on demographic variables after similar recruitment strategies were used. There were usable records for 39-46 women (depending on the analysis), and for 25-27 men (depending on the analysis).

Rural older sample (tested at Time 2). This sample was tested in 1987 in eastern North Carolina. Individuals were recruited at a senior center. They did not differ significantly in age, male/female ratio, or marital status from the other Time 2 older samples. There were usable records for 20-23 women (depending on

the analysis), and for 9 men.

Longitudinal repeats sample (tested at Times 1 & 2). Although very large numbers of the Time 1 sample had subsequently died, become seriously ill, moved from the area, stopped being "community dwelling", or did not wish to use their energies to participate, we did locate and retest 20 willing local volunteers after significant efforts. There were 17 women and 3 men. Of course we had concerns about the nature of these retest respondents, so comparison of their scores at Time 1 with scores of the remainder of the sample was done. The retest sample did look like the "average" Time 1 participants on demographic and BSRI scores.

Middleaged sample (tested at Time 2). This sample was comprised of men and women between the ages of 35 and 50, volunteers for a problem solving study (Rogers, 1989; Rogers, Sinnott, Van Dusen, 1991). Demographic data on these respondents indicated that they were fairly well educated (high school graduate to Ph.D.), of middle class status, married, living in the greater Baltimore area.

There were 82 men and 82 women in the middleaged sample.

Measures

The main measure of interest was the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), a measure of sex roles developed by Sandra Bem in 1974. The publications cited above contain extended discussion of the characteristics and origin of the BSRI. The test consists of 60 adjectives, 20 stereotypically associated with femininity (e.g.,

"tender"), 20 stereotypically associated with masculinity (e.g., "dominant"), and 20 neutral items. The femininity items constitute the F scale, and the masculinity items constitute the M scale. A high score on a scale is taken to suggest that the respondent perceives him or herself to be high in that stereotypic behavior pattern (i.e., femininity or masculinity). Each participant was requested to rate how well each adjective described him/herself on a scale from 1 (never or almost never true) to 7 (always or almost always true). The sum of item scores on the masculinity items was the masculinity score used for these analyses; the sum of item scores on the femininity items was the femininity score used for these analyses. Alternative ways of scoring the BSRI were bypassed for this study based on experiences from earlier research cited above.

Results

For this phase of the inquiry only quantitative analyses were performed. In order to do a first comparison of the scores of the various samples, however small or large they were, mean scores on the masculinity scale (M scale) and the femininity scale (F scale) were calculated for women and men for each sample. Planned comparisons were then made between selected samples of interest. Other serendipitous differences then were analyzed.

The means of men and women on each sample on the BSRI M

scale and the BSRI F scale are in Table 1. They will be discussed in terms of the hypotheses.

None of the samples strongly endorsed the sex role items. This supported the first (informal) hypothesis. The strongest self description obtained is of masculine qualities reported by older rural men who had an average item score of 5.57 (partially supporting the forth hypothesis). There was little variability (only about one point) in the F or M scale average scores among samples and genders. Even in the significant inferential statistics that follow, effect sizes were not large.

Contrary to the prediction of the second hypothesis, the Time 2 cohort of older women were higher on the M scale than the earlier Time 1 cohort of women [t (272) =6.01, $p<.0001$]. Time 2 older men were lower on the F scale than the earlier Time 1 cohort of older men [t (122) =2.53, $p<.01$]. Time 2 men and women significantly differed from each other on the F scale, with women endorsing F items more often than men [t (69) =3.72, $p<.001$].

The third, longitudinal, hypothesis, suggested decreased role scores over time. Women's scores on the F scale did decrease significantly over time [t (16) =2.21, $p=.04$], but they increased slightly on the M scale over time. (Men's increased on the M and F scales over time, significantly on the former [t (2) =13.00, $p=.006$], but the very small n makes any conclusions impossible.) Generally, the longitudinal hypothesis was not supported. Sex differences in scores were not compared directly due to the small number of men.

The fourth hypothesis predicted more stereotyped responses in rural respondents. This was true for both men and women, but only on M items. The rural older men were significantly more likely than the urban sample of older men to endorse M items [t (34) =2.49, p=.03], but the small number of men makes this analysis suspect. The rural older women were significantly less likely to endorse M items than urban older women [t (57) =2.44]. Sex differences existed for the M scale, along stereotyped lines, as the hypothesis predicts.

The fifth hypothesis predicted more stereotypic scores in the middleaged than in the older respondents, but was not supported. Middleaged women scored lower on the F scale than the older cohorts, but scored like older cohorts on the M scale. Middleaged men scored in the middle of the older groups on the M scale and lower than most older groups on the F scale. None of these differences were significant. However, in support of the hypothesis, middleaged men scored differently from middleaged women in stereotyped directions [for M scale: t (157) = 3.82, p< .0001; for F scale: t (162) = 5.49, p< .0001].

Discussion

The results of this preliminary and exploratory study were thought provoking in terms of theory. They supported some of the five tentative informal and formal hypotheses about sex role development in middle and old age but also gave us some

surprises. As predicted, mature adult cohorts did not appear to strongly endorse or differentially endorse BSRI items as descriptive of them. As predicted, M items were stereotypically endorsed by rural, as opposed to urban, women and men. As predicted, middleaged women and men were different from each other, in terms of sex roles, more than older women and men at the same point in history.

However, there were surprises. Respondents often gave even stronger endorsements than Bem's (1974) college students or Hoffman and Fidell's (1979) middleaged respondents. Surprises included the finding that the Time 2 new older cohort was more stereotyped in responses than the Time 1 original older cohort, coupled with the finding that the same Time 1 women respondents, at Time 2, would more strongly endorse the items of the opposite gender than they did at the earlier testing. It also was surprising that middleaged and older respondents did not differ more, given the life tasks that these two age groups often address in our culture.

This leaves us with mixed support for many earlier theories of sex role development during mature adulthood mentioned in the references above. In this limited preliminary data there is no readily apparent coherent shift in roles related to simple age-related developmental stages. Traditional polarized roles and role reversals are not articulated consistently, nor is there a clear shift toward androgyny in response to "life after parenthood". Life context seems to have some effect, supporting

the idea that roles are adaptive and learned. And if social change or role transcendence is gradually shifting the sex roles terms we use to describe ourselves, it is not clearly apparent in this relatively short period, in middleaged and older individuals, at least.

Looking at the women's data (since their numbers are greater than the men and conclusions can be reached with more certainty) offers more mysteries. The Time 1 women inch up in F scores and significantly move up in M score by retesting at Time 2, but the later "new" older cohort is less F and more M than the first cohort ever was. Does this mean that both of these cohorts might be responding to social changes? The new Time 2 cohort of older women has the highest M scores of all the groups; does this mean that both age and social effects are influencing their responses? Or does the higher F (compared with M) score for every sample suggest that in spite of either change traditional polarized roles still hold some sway that is larger than other changes? Even examining the men's scores from groups that have sufficient respondents leads to puzzles: the Time 2 new cohort of older men and the middleaged men at the same time point have almost identical M and F scores not unlike those of the Time 1 larger older cohort (from the original study). Perhaps the gap between the M and F scores is narrowing.

We may ultimately find that sex roles are very much <u>contexted</u> roles. The life demands of middleaged and older women and men may not include the mating/childrearing/workplace demands

that fueled the original choices of adjectives for the BSRI. Perhaps if we can capture the distinctive historical and other contexts related to these roles at these ages we would see them become more salient as they perhaps are for the rural sample of older adults.

Cognitive consistency may demand that adults claim and then keep consistent self descriptions. The respondents in these preliminary studies adopted their sex role attributes years ago, as children, growing up in a gender polarized historical time. While perhaps remaining consistent, the respondents' interesting and overlapping M and F score distributions suggest that the development of role attributes may go beyond androgyny and depend on something other than gender. While this is no a revolutionary idea, it seem to be one that needs periodic restatement. We may need to return, then, to the idea that some other descriptions or attributes (which need to be defined, perhaps for each cohort) may be the important lenses through which these adults view their worlds and their lives.

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Table 1: Mean Femininity Scale and Masculinity Scale Scores, by Subsample and Gender

Subsample	Femininity Scale	Masculinity Scale
A. Tested at Time 1, Entire Original Older Sample, 1980 Scores		
Women	5.35	4.09
Men	5.00	4.64
B. Tested at Time 1, Original Older Sample Members Who Were Later Available for Longitudinal Retest, 1980 Scores		
Women	5.38	4.43
Men	5.21	4.55
C. Tested at Time 2, Scores from Longitudinal Retest of Time 1 Ss (Sample B above)		
Women	5.18	4.51
Men	5.28	5.20
D. Tested at Time 2, New Cohort Older Ss, Similar Demographically to Samples B/C (above)		
Women	5.21	4.88
Men	4.67	4.88
E. Tested at Time 2, Rural Older Ss, Different Demographically from Samples B/C/D (above)		
Women	5.14	4.35
Men	4.90	5.57

F. Tested at Time 2, Middleaged Ss

Women	5.08	4.66
Men	4.67	5.12